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REUNITING THE CHURCH

BY THE REVEREND HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

THE most significant movement among the churches to-day, whether it be considered with reference to the causes which prompt it or to the results which are likely to follow it, is the campaign for federation and unity. The movement is significant if only in the striking contrast that it presents to the interdenominational spirit with which our fathers were acquainted. In serious controversy and sometimes in trivial squabbles, the differences between denominations used to be taken with a seriousness that projected their consequences into eternity. It is even to be feared that Ruskin's experience, the turning-point, as he calls it, in his revolt against the evangelical creed, could have been duplicated in many places in Europe and America. He writes in his vexation:

"A little squeaking idiot was preaching to an audience of seventeen old women and three louts that they were the only children of God in Turin; and that all the people in Turin outside the chapel, and that all the people in the world out of sight of Monte Viso, would be damned."

And now, in a way that to our fathers would have seemed unbelievable, the dissevered sections of the Church are talking, praying, working, and perhaps most momentous of all, singing for unity.

The prevailing factors in this new movement for unity are the same forces which are reshaping all our modern world. The Church, as a mystical communion of the saints, may escape the compelling effects of democracy and science; but the churches as organizations, visible, corporate, and very human, can no more evade the transforming influences of the modern world than can the institutions of politics and business. Churches, as organizations, are the children of their age, and always have been. If to-day forty per cent. of

all Christians in the United States belong to communions democratically governed, it is not because in some independent moment of vision they saw their duty and did it, but because they have been constrained by the unevadable progress of popular rule. As in the democratizing of the churches, so in their unifying, Christians may guide the movement, but they neither caused it nor can they stop it. The forces which are making inevitable concentration, interdependence, and co-operation, dominate the modern age, and act upon churchly institutions with transforming effect as impartially as they do upon big business and international relationships.

One immediate effect of the rapidly changing social and intellectual environment in which the churches are set is to make obsolete many of the issues which divide the sects. The causes which launched the several denominations are all historic, many of them merely local, most of them without any lively interest for modern minds, so that wrangling churches to-day bear increasing resemblance to belated football-players, who continue an inconsequential scuffle, after the ball has been carried a long way down the field. How often do our modern denominations merely incarnate old national antipathies that were institutionalized into separate churches centuries ago, or old speculative theological controversies that to men now are quarrels between tweedledum and tweedledee! Only occasionally, at least among Protestants, does a denominational peculiarity coincide with a burning conviction of living men. The world has outgrown the causes which laid the boundary lines of the sects, and in large part, they are just about as important in modern life as are the boundaries of ancient Indian tribes in the present political system of Massachusetts.

Not only in general have the progressive forces of the modern world left far behind many of the ancient quarrels of the churches, but in particular, democracy and science, the two master powers of our age, are compelling the churches into federation. Old provincialisms, which depended for their existence on the isolation of small communities, inevitably disappear as science makes intercommunication easy, breaks down segregating walls, until far-sundered people are neighbors and allies. That there should be sixteen small Baptist bodies, all of which can be traced to local and temporary causes, and none of which has spread

far from its original habitat, is explicable in a day of segregated communities, but that these provincial dissensions, the outcome of a bygone segregation, should be perpetuated when the whole world is being made into a neighborhood, is to the new generation unintelligible. Only in the most remote villages of Scotland, and among the older people, will you hear the Celtic tongue still spoken; and the forces of our cosmopolitan civilization which drive out ancient and cherished languages and cause men to seek a common speech, are to-day, whether we will or not, making obsolete and untenable our denominational provincialisms. Real differences of conviction the new age can comprehend, but not twelve kinds of Presbyterians and eighteen kinds of Methodists in the United States. How many of our divisions are of this character! Without a single change in doctrine or polity," says Dr. Carroll in his *Religious Forces of the United States*, "the eighteen Methodist bodies could be reduced to three or four; the twelve Presbyterian to three; the twelve Mennonite to two." Let all the dissevered denominational families be reunited into single households again, and instead of one hundred and forty-three sectarian titles in the United States, we would have but forty-two. The differences, institutionalized in these subdivisions of the sects, are not now nor have they ever been truly representative of genuine and significant divergency of thought. They are the relics of old isolations, the vestiges of a bygone day before it could be said, "The nineteenth century made the world into a neighborhood, the twentieth will make it into a brotherhood."

With this unifying influence of the new cosmopolitan mind, democracy joins her prodigious power. Democracy insists on service as the goal and test of every institution. Even government has no value in itself; the divine right of a royal family to rule is gone; neither the glory of a king nor the integrity of a dynasty is a sufficient reason for any policy of State; all government has but one use, by the fulfilling or denial of which it stands or falls,—it must serve the people. This same transformation of ideals is taking place within the churches. Where once the propagation of a special creed, or the perpetuation of a ritual, seemed a sufficient *raison d'être* for a denomination, to-day all churches are subjected to a single test, a test at once Christian and democratic; they must prove their right to live

by the service that they render. Which is the True Church was once debated with opposing texts; now it is seen that the True Church will be picked out, not by arguments from the past, but by power to render service in the present. The True Church is being selected now by the survival of the fittest, and the law that governs the selection is an eternal one, "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant." As ministry to the real needs of men is thus emphasized as the objective of the Church, all speculative quarrels over niceties in metaphysics and all consuming interest in the perpetuation of a polity or ritual that makes no real difference to life, give way, gradually but certainly, before the desire to be of use. Men who could not and who should not in the interest of unity make any dishonorable surrender of cherished and significant belief, discover that men of most diverse beliefs can be united, not in creedal subscription but in practical service, not in doctrine but in deed. Church unity is not by any means a matter of our choice alone; it is being forced on us by the democratic test of service. The churches can co-operate in programme, if they cannot unite in creed, and democracy insists that they must—or die.

With the new cosmopolitanism breaking down the churches' provincial isolation, and with democracy forcing upon them the test of service, the scientific demand for efficiency adds the final necessity against which in vain the opponents of federation and union are struggling. In these days the whole world has been so opened to Christian missions, thus demanding an international Christianity, and the churches have been so faced with the call for lively social service, which cannot with impunity be refused, that the demand for efficiency has become overwhelming. What sectarian divisions do to effective religious work is obvious. The pathetic spectacle of little villages whose numerous spires suggest inexcusable competition, rather than religious aspiration, and where, as Professor Bosworth has said, the minister finds, "Not a field, but a hole," has become unendurable. Whatever the abstract truth may be about the importance of denominational differences, this situation, both true and typical, is manifestly wrong; a town with twelve hundred people, ten church buildings, ten denominations, fourteen congregations, ten ministers, and an average membership of twenty-nine per church.

If this spoiling of the Church's work by sectarianism is clear at home, it is even more evident upon the foreign field. What shall we say, when, to a traveler in the Himalayas, a turbaned Indian insists that he is not a Christian, but that he is a Scotch Presbyterian? What is the answer to the Japanese nobleman, crossing the public square at Tokio, who, urged to become a Christian, sweeps his hand about the square where a score or more missionary agencies have their homes and asks, "Which Christianity?" Not much longer can the churches retain their self-respect if they continue to expend millions in propagating in the Orient western sectarianism which the Orient does not need, the Orient's aversion to which is sufficiently indicated by a series of quotations from missionaries at the Edinburgh conference:

"The Chinese are prepared to go a great deal further toward unity than the foreign representatives"; 'The best and most intelligent Chinese leaders are ahead of the average missionary in desiring one Church of Christ in China'; 'If the missionaries fail to come to the mark, I believe that the Chinese will speak out for union with no uncertain sound.'

"If the Western shepherds do not look out," said a missionary recently, "the Eastern sheep will all be in one fold."

These great forces of science and democracy which make the Churches' old quarrels obsolete, her old provincialisms untenable, which compel her to prove her right to live by the test of service, and which judge her divisions by their influence on her efficiency, are felt a long while before they are analyzed. Their first effect upon churchmen is a slowly changing sentiment, where, without knowing why, folk feel that denominations are not as important as they used to be. To-day, within the churches, sectarian partitions grow so diaphanous, that recently a single church, out of thirty new communicants coming by letter at one service, welcomed representatives of seventeen different denominations. Denominational loyalty yields readily to convenience, to changed family relationships, to the attraction of personal friendliness, and even to the desire for social aggrandizement. When they are regarded most seriously, the separated churches are often looked upon as political parties are looked upon by independent citizens: they are expedients for the service of a cause, to be used when they are usable, to be reformed when they are wrong, and to be abandoned when they become hopelessly intractable. No longer are

they arks of the Covenant, each one claiming to enshrine the only hope for this life and the next.

If this increasingly is the attitude within the churches, the attitude of men outside the churches is forcing upon ecclesiastics, even when they are loath to see it, the unescapableness of the new situation. The more men are interested as are the wage-earners in campaigns for social righteousness which make a difference to life, the more men are concerned as are modern thinkers, with religious problems immediate and urgent, the more they turn away from an institution belated in its emphasis, provincial in its dissensions, and inefficient because of its sectarianism. In an age when men are tremendously in earnest, it is a tragedy that religion is represented by sects divided over issues about so many of which no one can be in earnest.

The answer which the Protestant churches have already made to the new situation is not by any means inconsiderable. On the foreign field comity between the sects increasingly is practised. In the Philippines, for example, no church works in another's territory, but, combined in the "Evangelical Union of the Philippine Islands," the denominations have so divided the ground that the Filipinos "scarcely know there is more than one Protestant Church." Hospitals like the one at Iloilo, jointly financed and managed by Baptists and Presbyterians; Medical, Normal, Arts, and Theological Schools of an interdenominational character now to be found in almost all the fields; and everywhere missionary conferences to promote fraternal co-operation, evidence the desire to escape competition and discover bases for union. At home the same sort of comity is being attempted when new territory is opened in the west. Actual amalgamation has already been achieved in whole or in part between churches thinly divided as were regular and Cumberland Presbyterians, or regular and Free-Will Baptists. Federations everywhere are being organized, from those founded for local purposes, to the more comprehensive "Federation of the Churches of Christ in America." Fraternal co-operation all the way from occasional affiliation, to great societies such as the Christian Associations, and extensive campaigns such as the Laymen's Missionary Movement and the Men and Religion Forward Movement, manifest clearly the new spirit of brotherhood. Even direct approaches to the main problem are being attempted as

in the "Christian Unity Foundation," under the tutelage of the Episcopalians. And there is at least one Theological Seminary, one of our largest and best known, which owns no sectarian affiliation, requires of its professors no creedal subscription, and has on its faculty representatives of all the largest denominations.

Canada is giving to the churches one of the most enheartening exhibitions of the possibility of union. In a movement to incorporate the Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians of the Dominion into one body, the first two have already voted by overwhelming majorities in favor of the plan, and the last is waiting only until a substantial majority can be changed to practical unanimity. It is a clear certainty that soon there will be one church instead of three. Until recently four separate Theological Seminaries were maintained in Montreal by Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists. These four are now incorporated into one, and on the campus of McGill University a single building is being erected which will house them all. No one in touch with the strong currents of modern ecclesiastical life can fail to feel the irresistible set of the stream toward unity.

In the midst of our enthusiasm for church union, however, it is worth while for us to note that the modern movement which so inflames with a prophetic zeal the minds of liberal and progressive men is quite in opposition to the movement inaugurated by the liberal and progressive men of four centuries ago, and by them sustained at cost of martyrdom. In Milton's *Areopagitica* it was of sects and schisms he was speaking when he said:

"What some lament of, we rather should rejoice at, should rather praise this pious forwardness among men to reassume the ill-deputed care of their religion into their own hands again. I fear that this iron yoke of outward conformity has left a slavish print upon our necks—the ghost of a linen decency yet haunts us. We stumble and are impatient at the least dividing of one visible congregation from another."

With all our zeal for union, therefore, it is well for us to search the possible iniquities of union, well to remember that union in Christendom is not an experiment untried. Once there was one organization and none other. Once all power was vested in one Church, and that power growing by what it fed upon and exaggerating its scope with the access of its authority, brought on the darkest days of Chris-

tendom. The pendulum's swing against union is as inevitable as the pendulum's swing toward it, if union be purchased at too great a cost, and the modern movement will come to wreck if it forgets the days when union, not schism, was the curse, when like smothered men who strike out for more room to breathe, the noblest spirits fought through schism to liberty and counted sectarianism the highroad to release. A chain-gang at lock-step is not God's idea of the Communion of the Saints.

Now the elements which made men like Milton rebel against conformity are present in to-day's situation. They are found in all proposals for union on the basis of a common creed and in all efforts to proceed forthwith to unite Christians in one organization. These two propositions commonly made to-day are plans that will lead to reaction, or else blind alleys that will lead nowhere. "We must all think alike" is a cry that will not rally modern men. "We must all join the same organization" is a proposal that will issue as did the Tower of Babel. "We must all work together for the Kingdom of God on earth, we must count the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith, worth more than our mint, anise and cummin; we are all here for the same purpose, dedicated to the same work, servants of the same cause; we must co-operate and not compete"; this is the only open door that leads toward union. We cannot get together on a unanimous statement of belief, however simple; we cannot devise an artificial organization that will assimilate us all; but we can be welded on the anvil of a common purpose by the hammer of the human cry.

That co-operation in programme is the immediate step toward union is indicated by the history of Christian sectarianism. At first, the sects were bitterly hostile, counting rack and thumb-screw arguments none too strong to prove their points. From hostility the churches moved into the age of controversy, when words were the pillories and logic was the branding-iron—an age whose praises Lowell sang as he compared it with its predecessor:

"And most of all thank God for this—
The war and waste of clashing creeds
Now ends in words and not in deeds;
And no one suffers loss or bleeds
For thoughts that men call heresies."

From controversy, then, into the age of toleration the churches moved, the age of the porcupine attitude between the dissevered sects, when racks and thumb-screws were all in the museums and joint debates on election and free-will had grown uninteresting, but when mutual suspicion everywhere prevailed, and aloofness and rivalry were common practices. And now from toleration we have moved into the age of co-operation, when the consciousness of a single mission holds increasingly the focus of the Christian thought, and in a programme of co-operative work to get the Christian tasks fulfilled, our differences gradually melt into fringes of our thought and tend to disappear. No one supposes that this age is the last. The vision will not down that a day shall come when the separated churches all shall gather, each with her contribution of well-guarded thought and life, to build the larger church that is to be,

“When all names lost in one Name
The Kingdom draweth nigh.”

But to state the creed or frame the constitution of that future communion is not this generation's task. From hostility to controversy, from controversy to toleration, from toleration to co-operation, from co-operation to the spirit of unity, and from unity to union, that is the progress of the Church.

The proposal to proceed with the restoring of lost union on the basis of a common creed plainly involves the mistaken idea that intellectual disagreements in the Church are less than they used to be. On the contrary, no previous age ever saw such a diversity of thinking among Christians. To be sure, scores of old differences have become dead issues, as we just have said, and are to modern minds, as obsolete as the circumstances that gave them birth. There are old disagreements, however, which vitally persist, and to these are added new dissensions, of which the last fifty years have probably been more prolific than any other half-century in Christian history. In times when there are real grounds for various opinions, you cannot get unanimous subscription to a creed without a most ignoble, syrupy compliance. The differences to-day between the denominations are paling, but within the denominations the divergence grows. A liberal Presbyterian and a liberal Congregationalist understand each other well, but liberal Presbyterians and reactionary

ones make the record of their annual gathering read like the report of a fair in Killarney. As in political parties, so in the Church, the disappearance of the causes which laid the former party lines does not mean that one party is now to arise, but rather that new parties are in process of formation. If the present denominational boundaries do not represent our real differences, we must not be deceived into false hopes. When the break-up of the present alignment comes, it will probably not be into immediate union, but into a new arrangement of diversity, into modern differences expressed in institutions.

One way is commonly proposed by which to escape this difficulty. Creeds are symbols of worship, some are saying, not restrictive statements of belief. As an ancient hymn is unanimously sung, although its sentiments may be foreign to our experience and the theology which it expresses may be alien from our thought, so a creed is an expression of adoration, not an assertion of definitive conviction. But this will never do. It is one thing to sing a glorious hymn of praise, even when one recognizes that the theology that influenced its words is no longer held; it is another matter in the solemnity of a service dedicated to the God of Truth, in a sanctuary across whose threshold nothing that maketh a lie should ever come, to stand and say definitely "I believe," and then make a series of statements in which neither the minister nor one in ten of the congregation does believe. We have a churchman's authority for the principle that just as one may begin a letter to his enemy with Dear Sir, so a clergyman may recite the creed which he no longer believes, and that "as the custom of departure from the literal meaning of creeds grows, there is less and less guilt in unvarnished subscribing." We have this same churchman's explicit application of his principle, for says he, "Among the most numerous sections of the clergy, nothing can exceed the contempt with which the Thirty-nine Articles are commonly treated"; and yet, "Before being ordained or licensed to a curacy, or instituted to a benefice, a clergyman is required to say, 'I, A. B., do solemnly make the following declaration: I assent to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion.'"* The question may be discussed as to how long a man or church frankly accepting such a creedal basis can retain public confidence; but there is no

* *The International Journal of Ethics*, January, 1897.

question whatsoever as to whether or not the churches can be united on that basis. The writers of these old creeds would not thank us for this treatment of them. Those reverend words were written because men did believe them, so seriously that stake and fagot could not discourage the conviction of their precise and imperishable truth. "Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled without doubt he shall perish everlastingly" was not written to be sung as a hymn. It is an obvious evasion and subterfuge when in any church the recitation of an ancient creed is perpetuated under the excuse that, while it is not an expression of present intellectual conviction, it is a symbol of worship, and to offer such a proposal as a basis for the reunion of the Church is to build a house on sand, against the day when the rains descend and the floods come. Already increasing multitudes of plain men, whose definitions of honesty are not perhaps sufficiently convoluted, have lost all patience with this pious fraud, and increasing numbers of clergymen are refusing to share in its unholy perpetuation. Too many Christians are convinced that "a church of make-believers would very soon beget a generation of non-believers," for them to allow the unifying of Christendom on the basis of creeds, sung as hymns, because they cannot be affirmed as convictions.

If the attempt to frame a new creed or to discover an old one, which shall be a basis for reunion, is a fruitless effort, so too is the attempt *de novo* to devise a compromise organization that shall comprehend us all. No one can attend conferences for the discussion of church union, however irenic and fraternal, without catching the note once voiced by a man who had quarreled with his friend. "We simply must be reconciled," he said, "and since I cannot be reconciled to you, you must be reconciled to me." In this road to unity by benevolent assimilation all sects believe.

The reason for this difficulty is deeper than any intellectual difference and is not to be ascribed simply to perversity. It lies in a realm of feeling not altogether ignoble. It is true that the churches have historic beginnings, in the causes of which we are not now vitally interested, but in the long course of the centuries associations have gathered, precious and beautiful to those who have been initiated into the knowledge and appreciation of them. Like old homesteads, they are flavored with the memory of ancestral joy

and sorrow, are made impressive alike by the tragedies and prosperities that have there befallen, and their hold upon the affection of their members is determined neither by the cause which launched them nor by the intrinsic value of their peculiar tenets, but by cumulative memories of ancient sacrifice and personal association, no less strong because often indefinable. All denominations have not only loyal members but casual adherents who feel for them a poetic rather than a rational allegiance, and poetic loyalty is often tenacious unto death.

This sense of community with the special movement in Christian history to which a man belongs does not prevent his entering with enthusiastic appreciation into the heritage of another section of the Church. He may even in this regard feel that Tennyson's sentiment is right,

"That man's the best cosmopolite
Who loves his native country best."

But this poetic allegiance makes impossible any extempore devising of a comprehensive organization that lacks the hallowing sanction of long history to give it power. The federal consciousness, the spirit of nationalism, has grown slowly in America, out of the confederation of the States, and in the Church as in the Nation, the retention of State boundaries, the doctrine of State rights, the cherishing of State traditions, even the bitterness of State jealousies, will long survive confederation for mutual defense and support. Confederation comes first; complete union afterward.

The fear is justified, therefore, that the immediate effort after a common statement of belief or a common polity may prove to be red herring drawn across the trail along which the real hope of union lies. If already the churches are so manifestly coming close together in a multitude of fraternal co-operations, the reason lies neither in the greater homogeneity of opinion nor in greater likeness of polity; the underlying reason is that with no less faith in immortality, the Church's emphasis is being shifted from the future life to this life, from postponed expectancy to present work, from interest in speculative theology to enthusiasm over her greater tasks, the building of moral character, and the social service of the people. By as much as this, her mission looms larger in importance than her differences of dogma and her dissimilarities of government by

so much is her unity made possible. A thousand differences of opinions, new and old, will make unanimity now, as hitherto, impossible, but the eager enthusiasms of the Church do not move in the realm where these dissensions lie. Rather her interest increasingly is centered around the sort of personal and social service that makes a real difference to human life, and with the increase of this stress on service, the unity of the Church grows in hopefulness and power. It progresses step by step with the shift of emphasis from speculative metaphysics to practical helpfulness, from eschatology to spiritual character and social righteousness. The one place where the churches to-day are actually coming together is neither creed nor polity, but work.

The enthusiasts for church union, therefore, will do the best service for their cause, by joining in the proclamation of a common campaign for the spiritualizing of human life, and in furthering every form of co-operation where the dissevered churches seek united effort on this their common task. As Great Britain's oppression was the unifier of the colonies so the social wrongs of this modern age, creating need for common defense and common aggression, must be the unifiers of the churches. When men of great wealth, selfishly obtained and selfishly expended say in spirit as Napoleon did, "I am not an ordinary man; I am an extraordinary man and ordinary rules do not apply to me"; when in a nation called Christian, men still work at grueling tasks twelve hours a day and seven days a week; when young children are sapped of all promise of a fine maturity by nights and days of exhausting labor at the loom until of many a man grown rich by their toil the prophet's word is true, "They sold a girl for wine and drank it"; when Senators buy their places as they do their automobiles and vice is by the guardians of the public made a source of profit, not an object of repression; and when at the dregs of it all young girls are sold into a slavery worse than death while still so young that they cry for their dolls; in the presence of conditions such as these from which the sensitive and philanthropic mind recoils blistered with shame and turbulent with indignation, of what value are our ecclesiastical divergencies of dogma and our peculiarities of polity?

The Task must be the unifier of the Churches.

Moreover, if the Church's mission to the individual is

clearly seen, in an age when men gain the whole world and neglect the springs of personal wealth and power which alone can make the whole world worth possessing, shall not her zeal for her redeeming mission, so greatly needed, make emphasis upon her differences seem ridiculous? For men now as ever can find no satisfactory interpretation for their lives except a spiritual interpretation, cannot think deeply, as Samuel Johnson said, without thinking religiously, and when their doubts are their only beliefs, and they live haphazard as they must, with lives quite uninterpreted, quite uninspired by any sure convictions, they lack not simply hope for the future but any basis also for positive endeavor now. To-day as in John Bunyan's time, Doubting Castle is kept by Giant Despair and his wife, Diffidence. If the Church has a message, therefore, well grounded in reasonableness and well authenticated in its effect on life, a message of assurance that the moral ideals are not mirages but realities, of valid and unconquerable hope that all sacrificial labor is a contribution which God uses and shall crown with triumph, a message that the principles of life exemplified in Jesus are not steam from a physical kettle, somehow automatically boiling, but the revelation of creative and eternal Spirit, let the Church tell men this, for this they need. These things are not man's luxuries but his necessities; not the banquet's macaroons and lady-fingers but the solid courses aimed at Life's elemental hunger.

This is the Task at home and in the islands of the sea and the Task must be the unifier of the churches.

Once let the idea take possession of the Christian people that they are not here to distribute passes to a future Heaven, but to help men begin now the kind of life that it would be worth while continuing in Heaven; let them be fully persuaded that they are not here to defend a speculative creed or to preserve a time-honored polity but to inspire men with a transforming faith in the spiritual meaning of life and to reconstruct society until it conforms with the implication of that meaning, and at once you will have at least this much union, that like the wheels of a watch, though some creeds go one way and some another, all will co-operate on the common task—to make the hands go round!

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK.